

Emergency Financial Assistance for Teachers of Color

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE BRIEF

Written by Imani Evans

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Introduction

Historically underrepresented minority educators face unique challenges and additional barriers to navigate higher education and persist in their roles after completion of their teacher preparation program. Disparities in financial support are among the challenges that have historically impacted educational access and achievement for groups of teachers from historically underrepresented groups (e.g., teachers of color). Using an emergency funding financial assistance program which provides support to preservice and in-service educators of color, The Minority Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Equity Center leaders' (MERREC) goal is to examine how financial assistance can influence retention of historically underrepresented minority educators, especially teachers of color.



Key Messages and Takeaways

- Problem: The retention of historically underrepresented minority teachers is impacted by disparities in financial support access to complete their teacher preparation programs and persist in their in-service educator roles.
- MERREC leaders have implemented a financial assistance program that provides emergency funding to preservice and in-service teachers, which could significantly influence teachers from historically underrepresented groups.
- Researchers and practitioners will receive the following:
 - Learning how emergency funding assistance differs from traditional financial aid packages
 - Recommendations for components of emergency funding to incorporate into practice

What We Know

Researchers and policymakers continue to explore strategies to address the shortage of teachers of color entering and remaining in the workforce. Historically, financial barriers to higher education have existed for individuals of color. However, there is evidence that teachers of color continue to face unique financial challenges once in the field, suggesting the need for continued financial support.

Shortage of Minoritized Teachers of Color

There is a divide between an increasingly diverse student population and a majority White teaching workforce (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Achinstein et al., 2010). Recent researchers have focused on lessening the gap between the proportion of minority students to minority teachers through recruitment and retention of teachers of color (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Achinstein et al., 2010). While all students, regardless of culture or race, benefit from a teacher workforce which is representative of the full racial and ethnic diversity of the United States, it is vital for students of color (Billingsley et al., 2019). The cultural and racial mismatches in student populations and teaching forces can have detrimental effects on students, including lower teacher expectations (Gershenson et al., 2016; Jones-Goods & Grant, 2016), cultural dissonances (Jones-Goods & Grant, 2016), and decreased student achievements (Egalite et al., 2015; Glock et al., 2015; Ouazad, 2014). Trends show that from the late 1980s to 2013 there has been a steady increase in the number of teachers of color being recruited (Ingersoll et al., 2019). However, there is a widening gap in the percentage of teachers of color who leave their positions compared to White teachers (Achinstein et al., 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2019). Despite being recruited into the field, new teachers of color remain most likely to exit the profession (Achinstein et al., 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2019). Based on the impact to students, establishing comprehensive systems to support the retention of teachers of color is a top priority for researchers, policymakers, and district and school level administration.

Financial Barriers in Higher Education

Disparities exist in college attainment and completion based on family income and socioeconomic status (Brock, 2010; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). Persistence and completion rates also differ significantly by race and ethnicity, with Latinx and Black students having the lowest rates (Brock, 2010). Believing that one has control over their life outcomes is an important success factor for preservice educators from minoritized groups. However, many preservice educators feel that their level of financial resources is a factor outside of their control (Clark et al., 2006). Need-based financial assistance, can have a positive impact on current students' abilities to remain enrolled and ultimately improve rates of on-time program completion (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). This current research suggests that providing financial support is vital to shape positive attitudes about educational and career success (Clark et al., 2006; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016).



In-service Support

Once teachers enter the field, personal finances can influence their decisions to stay or leave the classrooms (Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Harris et al., 2019). In particular, individuals who belong to a minority group are more likely to intend to leave for more lucrative career alternatives outside of education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley, 2004). Compensation and financial assistance are important factors when weighing the costs and rewards of remaining in the field (Billingsley, 2004). Paired with other work environment factors, lack of finances can lead to negative responses, such as increased stress and low levels of job satisfaction (Billingsley, 2004; Harris et al., 2019). Research shows that negative reactions result in withdrawal and attrition (Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Conversely, increased financial benefits can positively impact retention (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley, 2004).

What We Do

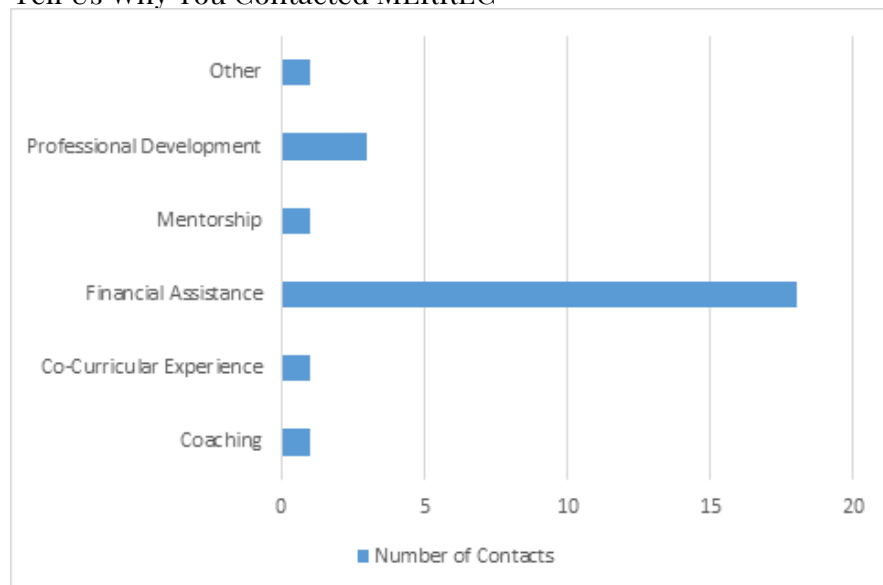
One of the core missions of the MERREC at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) involves recruiting, supporting, and retaining educators from historically underrepresented minority educators (e.g., teachers of color). The MERREC leaders acknowledge that systemic inequities exist and can exacerbate fundamental challenges for historically underrepresented minority educators to access and thrive in their positions at higher education and K-12 institutions. To help combat the challenges, the MERREC leaders have developed a financial assistance program, which provides emergency funding on a needs basis. Financial support is available to any current VCU School of Education educator or alumni. Funds can be used to cover expenses such as tuition, professional development, books, or general unexpected living expenses. Individuals can complete an application once per semester, which is processed within two to three weeks following the submitted request. After contact with MERREC officials, individuals complete a feedback survey about their experience.

"I requested funds to help support my needs as a teacher with an ill family member. It has greatly helped me to be able to function as my family struggles financially. I have able been able to become a mentor teacher to peers who are teaching for the first time."

What We Learned

Data were obtained using survey responses collected using a feedback form during the Fall 2020 semester. While the MERREC leaders provide a variety of support to current and former School of Education students, one noteworthy finding was that an overwhelming percentage (90%) of individuals who initiated contact with MERREC were in need of financial assistance (see Figure 1). The majority (80%) of the requests for support were received via e-mail.

Figure 1.
Tell Us Why You Contacted MERREC

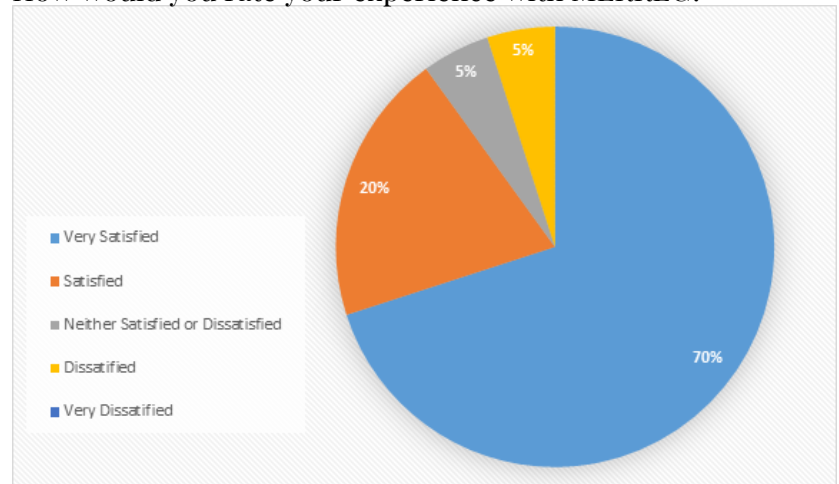


Applicants who received financial support were affiliated with VCU School of Education in a variety of ways, including graduate students, undergraduate students, VCU faculty/staff, VCU alumni, and VCU adjunct faculty. Notably, individuals who received financial assistance stated that it would have been difficult to continue in their preservice or in-service educator activities without the emergency financial support.

"The assistance given during my time of need was on time and greatly appreciated. I had taken this exam several times and the cost was taking a toll on my financial situation at that time."

In Figure 2, the initial findings showed that most individuals were ‘Very satisfied’ (70%) or ‘Satisfied’ (20%) with the support they received and were ‘Very Likely’ (85%) to refer a peer to the MERREC for support. Some similarities among comments provided in the feedback were the usefulness of being able to access funds for unexpected expenses, the ease of accessing the MERREC and the application process, and the quick turnaround time of the process as being instrumental in applicants’ abilities to cover expenses during emergencies. Many survey participants mentioned unforeseen circumstances, such as financial impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic, as events that would have made them unsuccessful in their programs or roles had the support not been available at the time.

Figure 2.
How would you rate your experience with MERREC?



Recommendations

- **Formation of centers and organizations specifically designed to address issues faced by historically underrepresented minority educators.**

It is necessary to acknowledge that individuals of historically underrepresented minority educator communities face unique challenges when navigating higher education and their professional roles. Providing centers and organizations within schools of education with individuals committed to addressing systemic and societal inequities that can impact the recruitment and retention of teachers of color will help ensure that minoritized educators of color receive focused and comprehensive support.

- **Provide emergency funding separate from scholarships and government financial aid packages.**

Many teachers of color encounter unexpected expenses, outside of tuition costs, which can act as barriers to program completion or persistence once in the field. Emergency funding type of financial assistance support will be used to provide a monetary source for expenses that may not be covered through other forms of financial aid.

- **Make emergency funding available to preservice and in-service educators from historically underrepresented minority educators.**

To ensure that historically underrepresented minority educators (e.g., teachers of color) are able to persist at every stage of their journey, financial assistance should not be limited to current students. Institutions should continue to support in-service alumni, including the availability of financial assistance for expenses and circumstances that may impact individuals' continued success in their positions as educators.

- **Take steps to ensure the process for acquiring funds is easily accessible and expedited.**

Institutional leaders must acknowledge that requesting financial assistance can be a sensitive matter. Leaders at the institution have a role in encouraging and empowering individuals who may need assistance to apply. The goal of the organization to provide emergency funding should be well-known and clearly stated. Various routes to express the need for financial assistance should be made available, including e-mail, phone, virtual meetings, and in-person meetings.

Conclusions

In addition to mentorship, professional development, and cocurricular experiences, an urgent need exists for a financial assistance program component when designing comprehensive systems to support historically underrepresented minority educators. This is evidenced by the number of contacts for emergency funding in comparison to other types of support that the MERREC provide currently. The ability to navigate the process for requesting aid in a way most suitable to the individual is also critical to ensuring educators feel empowered to seek assistance when needed.

"I will be a first-generation college graduate from a four-year university, so graduating means a lot to my family and myself. Thank you for this opportunity."

Many individuals who received financial aid were specifically pleased with the ability to utilize the funds for their unique needs at the time. The ability to utilize the funds for need has emphasized the distinction between scholarships or government-provided aid packages and emergency funding. Based on the MERREC's emergency financial assistance program, requesters were able to locate funds for unexpected expenses and expenses not covered by aid packages, such as licensure exams, application costs, living expenses, or rent. It is important for institutional leaders to consider current conditions, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which may increase the need for additional support, particularly in minoritized populations.

Finally, institutional leaders have a responsibility to continue to support educators from historically underrepresented minority educators at various stages in their lives. Retention and diversifying the educator workforce is dependent upon teachers of color having the tools to remain in the field once they complete their preparation programs. Therefore, financial assistance should remain an available support to those working in the field.

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